

THE MX IS A WEAPON liberals love to hate.

With good reason, they have opposed the MX and the mindlessness of the arms race it has represented.

But the context of the MX has changed dramatically in recent weeks — and it's time for liberals to change the way they look at the MX.

No, this is not an article about how I came to love the MX. It's an article about how the MX came to help the cause of arms control.

First off, we have to recognize that the question isn't whether you support or oppose the MX. It's whether you support or oppose the Scowcroft Commission recommendations, which comprise a package of three items:

Replace about 100 Minuteman and Titan 2 ICBMs with an equal number of MXes.

Begin work on a new missile — a small one with a single warhead — that can be deployed in the 1990s.

Revise our approach to arms control to place the emphasis on warhead counts rather than launcher counts.

Here are four reasons why it is in our best interest to support the Scowcroft package — and to support it enthusiastically.

THE CHANGE in arms control to emphasize warhead counts may sound technical, but it's a goal liberals have been seeking for some time. President Reagan has now agreed to this change in focus. Up to now, he has wanted to restrict the number of missiles while packing more warheads on each missile, which was only paying lip service to arms control. Reagan has now agreed, in writing, to a series of changes in his arms control posture, bringing him into the mainstream.

THE PACKAGE provides that if there is another ICBM after the MX, it will be a small, single-warhead weapon. Again, this is no technical change. It is a watershed development that liberals have been seeking. The multi-headed, MIRVed ICBMs that both superpowers have been building for the last decade are "destabilizing," that is, instead of deterring war, they can put a premium on starting a nuclear war, a goal no one embraces.

Let's say each side has 1,000 missiles, each with five warheads. This means each side can hit the other's missile silos with five warheads apiece. You only need two warheads per silo to have reasonable hope of wiping the other country's ICBM force out. Knowing the other fellow can wipe out your force and still have warheads left over, each country will be tempted in a crisis to strike first.



— Journal Sketch

Les Aspin

If we switch to single-warhead missiles, however, the picture changes. If we each have 1,000 missiles, we can each strike only 500 silos; we cannot threaten a wipe-out blow. Moreover, an attack will use up all of the attacking force to destroy only one-half of the defending force. The side which goes first is actually at a disadvantage. We can breathe more easily in a crisis.

The third component of the Scowcroft package is the proposal for 100 MXes. The MX carries 10 warheads. It has tremendous power and accuracy. Isn't it the evil silo-buster I was just railing against?

We must remember that it is not the missile that confers the power to wipe out the other fellow's ICBM force; it is a sufficient number of missiles. And 100 MXes is too few to threaten to wipe out all Soviet ICBMs.

But why build any MXes? Why not just go straight to the small, single warhead weapon?

For one thing, this is a compromise package. That means there was something in there for everyone and no one got everything he or she wanted. The administration wanted MX and agreed to other changes I've just outlined that the liberals have wanted. For us, the MX is the price of admission to the new arms control approach and the single-warhead weapon.

BUT THERE IS another reason for accepting the MX — a desire to advance arms control. The Soviets already have MX-type missiles. They aren't about to junk them simply because we don't have the equivalent. [They've had a decade in which to make that choice.] One hundred MXes on our side would threaten a good portion of their forces and awaken them to the concern that someday their land-based missiles could be just as vulnerable as ours.

The history of our negotiations

We can advance our hopes for arms control by deploying the MX — not in sufficient numbers to give the United States the power to launch a knockout blow, but to turn on a light bulb in the Kremlin brain and make it realize that it is in Moscow's interest as well as ours to shift to single-warhead missiles and to agree to a limit on warheads.

THE FOURTH REASON for supporting the Scowcroft recommendations is precisely because they are a compromise, a compromise that can move our nuclear arms policies off dead center. In this instance, compromise for the sake of compromise is not just helpful, but crucial.

A common question I am asked is whether we can trust Reagan to keep his end of the bargain. I believe we can. Having dealt with the White House on this issue over the last several months, I believe that Reagan has bought the package, for whatever reason. He is not just a defender of it, but an enthusiast for it.

Frankly, my concern is not with the Reagan White House, but with various parts of the Pentagon, and, in particular, the Air Force, where the single-warhead missile doesn't have appeal, since it is not a great technological leap forward. I am working on an amendment to prevent the Air Force from playing bait and switch.

There are my four reasons for supporting the Scowcroft commission recommendations. Are those recommendations perfect? Of course not. But the alternative is not "something better." The alternative is to sink deeper in the quicksand in which we have been mired for years.

The Scowcroft package gives us an opportunity — perhaps our last opportunity — to break out of this impasse and not only shape the future, but make sure there is a future to shape.

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